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Notes on Indonesian-Chinese and Filipino-Chinese Literature

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In both Indonesia and the Philippines, which were subject to more than three centuries of colonization by the early maritime empires of Holland and Spain respectively, there developed—owing to the late immigration of Chinese women—Chinese creole populations through the intermarriage of Chinese immigrant and native peoples. In the early nineteenth century, there were 100,000 such *peranakan* in Java, making up 2% of its population. The Chinese mestizo population in the Philippines at that time was the most sizeable in Southeast Asia, with 120,000 making up nearly 5% of the colonial population.

What was remarkable about these creole communities was the extent to which, despite continuing contact with both native and Chinese groups, they achieved a degree of cohesion and stability as communities that remained distinct from the “native” societies. Also noteworthy is the extent to which these communities underwent radical redefinition from the middle to the end of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century.

Their language was a creole based on indigenous languages mixed with Dutch/Spanish, Chinese, and other tongues. While the Chinese were subjected to periodic massacres and expulsions by the Dutch and Spaniards during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the mestizo or *peranakan* communities which flourished in their aftermath filled the roles vacated by the Chinese and performed crucial economic functions within the respective colonial states as middlemen

traders, artisans, and in the Indonesian case, laborers. They were accorded distinct legal status as a mediating category between natives and Chinese, and subject to specific regulations and restrictions. Not just a product of census classification and taxation, they resisted assimilation because native society in both countries occupied the lowest rung in the colonial hierarchy and was even more vulnerable to arbitrary colonial rule than Chinese society, and assimilation to native society was consequently considered a sign of downward social and economic mobility.

Economic competition with the Chinese over retail and wholesale trade engendered antagonism between Chinese and Chinese mestizos before the Chinese mestizos shifted to agriculture, landholding and professions after they were displaced in the mid-nineteenth century when the Chinese were allowed back in the Philippines. These Chinese mestizos merged with prosperous indigenous elites and formed the backbone of the Hispanized, Catholic elite which came to define themselves as “Filipinos” (a term hitherto applied to fullblooded Spaniards born in the Philippines). In Java, a similar alliance between *peranakan* and natives against Chinese took place, but because of the plurality of religious backgrounds of these classes, *peranakan* culture crystallized rather than blended into elite native culture.

In both countries, the beginning of the twentieth century witnessed the rapid growth of *totok* (China-born Chinese) communities, the flowering of organizational activities in the context of emergent Chinese and Southeast Asian nationalisms, and the call for re-sinicization. But while *peranakan* communities in Indonesia remained

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distinct from the indigenous population and underwent resinicization to some degree, by the early twentieth century, the Chinese mestizo class in the Philippines had largely disappeared as an entity into a nascent “Filipino” national community under American colonial rule, a Filipino community that came to see itself as standing apart from the “Chinese” who were now considered an alien minority and had their own organizations, schools, and associations.

In this sense, it is telling that the novels of the Filipino national hero, Jose Rizal, who was technically a Chinese mestizo, are revered and studied as masterpieces of *Philippine* literature, while the novels of Kwee Tek Hoay languish in relative obscurity and were, for a long time, excluded from Indonesian literary history and criticism as *peranakan* popular fiction written in Low Malay, a “mere language of communication.”

There are important differences in the history, language, and style of Indonesian and Filipino-Chinese writing. Unlike Indonesian-Chinese literature, which had a century-long tradition of writing in “Low Malay” and whose popular fiction sought to reach an audience not necessarily confined to the *peranakan* community, Chinese-Filipino literature for much of the twentieth century was written only in Chinese and addressed primarily to the relatively small Chinese Philippine reading public. Second- or third-generation Chinese Filipinos, educated in private schools and belonging to middle-class families and working mainly as professionals and often as academics in Philippine educational institutions, now write mainly in English, the language of prestige and power which also has a limited albeit influential elite audience, with Philippine languages coming in a poor second.

This choice of languages is instructive because it informs the kind of writing produced. Unlike the Indonesian Chinese popular novels, Philippine Chinese ones tend to be more self-consciously literary, and are relatively few in

number. There are more than 1,500 Indonesian-Chinese fiction, which taken together can fill a multivolume work. In contrast, Chinese-Filipino literature constitutes slim pickings, filling at most one or two volumes. To date, there have been only a handful of novels in Chinese, and two novels, both written in English, published in the Philippines.

Though substantive in number, Indonesian-Chinese literature was for a long time marginalized from Indonesian mainstream literature as the work of an ethnic minority, and furthermore stigmatized as non-literary, its content condemned as immoral, sensual, and therefore malignant and dangerous. It experienced a sharp decline in the post-independence period: the works of contemporary popular writers like Mira W. and Marga T. do not generally focus on *peranakan* themes, issues, and topics. By comparison, Chinese-Filipino literature in English or Philippine languages counts among its practitioners some of the best-known and most gifted writers in the Philippine literary scene today, but until Charlson Ong achieved national reputation in the 1980s as a writer of note, many of them only sporadically wrote about the Chinese experience.

To an important extent, timing and changing political contexts have been crucial in determining the eventual fate of Indonesian-Chinese and Philippine-Chinese writing.

The marginalization and separation of Indonesian-Chinese literature from mainstream, modern Indonesian literature began to be questioned in the 1960s. Low Malay, the language in which the *peranakan* writers wrote and which had given way after the war to a standardized “Riau Malay” that formed the basis of Bahasa Indonesia, was recuperated in the 1960s by Pramoedya Ananta Toer and his *peranakan* students at Baperki’s Universitas Respublica in Jakarta. Pramoedya and his students basically argued in favor of the historical, Low-Malay antecedents of Indonesian literature in the pre-Balai Poestaka

works which were not ethnically divided. Moreover, Pramoedya's masterpiece novels, the *Buru Quartet*, set during the rise of Indonesian nationalism, recorded the heyday of the Sino-Malay press, and underscored the importance of Chinese contribution to the development of Indonesian nationalism. Critics like Jakob Sumardjo have also written about *peranakan* Chinese literature. The 1992 University of Indonesia seminar on Bahasa and Sastra Melayu Tionghoa signaled a shift in Indonesian literary criticism and history with renewed attention paid to Indonesian-Chinese literature.

External and internal developments since the late seventies such as the growth and institutionalization of ethnic and cultural studies programs in the American, Australian and European academia, coupled with the growing scholarly and popular interest in the overseas Chinese and their role in the regional economic development in the wake of the so-called "East Asian miracle," and above all, changing political developments in Indonesia and the Philippines, and the coming-of-age of a new generation of critics and students—many of them of Chinese ancestry—interested in Indonesian-Chinese and Filipino-Chinese literature have made ethnic-Chinese literature a legitimate object of study and scholarship.

Two contrasting writers' careers in the

Philippines best exemplify the changing reception of Chinese writing in Southeast Asia. In the early eighties, Paul Stephen Lim published a collection of stories. It was a sign of those times that Paul Stephen Lim felt compelled to explain, in the preface to his book, his decision to write about the experiences of the Philippine Chinese by downplaying his Chineseness and by invoking, instead, his desire to be considered, not as an ethnic writer, but as A Writer. (It did not help that Lim's fear of being ghettoized or pigeonholed as a purveyor of "ethnic" fiction was exacerbated by critics who felt that they must constantly underscore the "transcendent" or "universal" appeal of literary texts produced by non-white writers while assuming that the works of white writers are necessarily already universal.) But the late 1980s saw the rise to literary prominence of Charlson Ong, who has written almost exclusively about the Chinese in the Philippines. What is notable about Ong's writing is that his works are in no way considered "limited" or "narrow" by Filipino critics and reading public alike. On the contrary, his sterling literary reputation rests precisely on his mining the rich lode of Chinese-Filipino experiences. The Philippine case may yet serve as a portent of the resurgence of Indonesian-Chinese writing.